

# *Where Do You Go For Healing?*

A Message Offered by  
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Psalm 103:1-5  
John 5:1-18

Many of us – no matter how whole we look on the outside – are broken and hurting on the inside. With some of us our need is obvious—we may have visual or hearing impairments or physical disabilities of other kinds. But with many of us our wounds are not so apparent. We're grieving, anxious, angry, lonely, or dealing with addictions, resentments, or depression. We may keep it well hidden, but we all need healing of one kind or another.

That's why today's scripture – you can find it John Chapter 5, beginning with verse 1 -- is so important, whether we are willing to admit that we need healing or not. It's a scripture about God's power to heal and how we can better understand the healing process. I'd like us to go over it together verse by verse. But before we do that, let's pray:

*Healing God, you know the condition of our hearts, where we are broken and where we are strong. As we hear of your healing power, may your Holy Spirit inspire us to come to you in our search for wholeness and new life. Amen.*

*After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem, by the Sheep Gate, there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha [other manuscripts use the more common name, Bethesda] which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids--blind, lame, and paralyzed.*

*John 5:1 NRSV*

John tells us that there was a pool by the “Sheep Gate.” The Temple had many gates and these gates were – and still are – landmarks: common ways of telling people where something was, kind of like saying, “it’s half a mile past the new Rutters.” Near one of these gates, says, John, was a pool, called Bethesda.

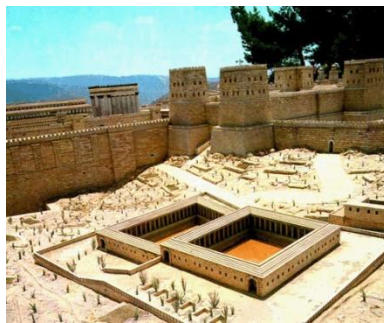
The name of the pool is said to be derived from the Aramaic language. *Beth hesda* (בֵּית חֶסְדָּא), means either *house of mercy* or *house of grace*. In the Syriac branch of this language, the term *hesdo* has two opposite meanings - *grace* and *disgrace*; this dual meaning may have been thought appropriate since the pool was seen as a place of disgrace due to the presence of invalids, and a place of grace, due to the granting of healing.

“Pool of Bethesda,” Wikipedia

The Pool of Bethesda is a real place, a place in the Bible that archeologists have pinpointed; you can go and see it today.



It doesn't look like much now, but two thousand years ago it was a magnificent complex covering many acres in the heart of Jerusalem.



It was actually two large 40' deep pools, with five covered colonnades, or porticoes, around the edges so that people could protect themselves from the blazing hot sun (kind of like cabanas). A complex this large likely served many purposes. Some people surely came simply to cool themselves off on days like today. Others came, literally, to bathe. Sick and infirm people lay by the pool "waiting for the moving of the water." Because Greeks exercised in the nude, this was not a place where devout Jews went for healing or relaxing, but there was a popular superstition at the time, that "an angel of the Lord went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; [and] whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had." [from an ancient manuscript of the Gospel of John; note that most versions of the Gospel lack John 5:4. This quoted text is what is in verse 4 in these disputed manuscripts.]

I don't know if anyone ever actually got healed at Bethesda before Jesus came that day; but we do know what was actually happening when the water bubbled. These pools were fed by underground springs which, at certain times, would emit gases that had been trapped deep underground, stirring up the water in an impressive display. It's a testimony to the power of hope that people will go *anywhere* for healing if they're desperate enough.

Where do *you* go for healing? The doctor's office? Your girlfriend or boyfriend? The spa? The refrigerator? The corner bar? It matters where you go, doesn't it? Not every place that promises healing can deliver.

And wherever that place is, how long have you been waiting? John tells us that

*{4} & {5} One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.*

Thirty-eight years: that was almost an entire life span for a man in Jesus' day. Brokenness was all he'd known in life. Some of you know what that's like. I sure do; I'm still wrestling with hurts and insecurities and "demons" from my past. Maybe you've struggled with some problem all your life, you've tried everything, and you think it can never go away—but you're wrong.

Read on.

*{6} When Jesus saw [the man] lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"*

Now what kind of question is that to ask a person who's been sick for 38 years—"Do you want to be made well?" Why wouldn't someone want to be made well?!

Lots of reasons. Some of us like to be victims. So long as we're victims we can get away with pity parties and blaming others. We get to rehearse again and again the list of people who are keeping us from getting ahead – meanwhile we don't have to take responsibility for our lives. Sometimes healing means having to *change*. That's scary.

Sometimes being "broken" isn't so bad. In fact, it can even be comfortable. In one sense this man didn't have such a bad life: lying by the pool in the shade, living off hand-outs, no time-clock to punch, no one yelling at him. Healing might mean this man would no longer be able to live on handouts; he'd have to learn a trade, get a job, make new friends. One pastor notes, "After thirty-eight years, he had probably learned how to function with his disorder," whatever it was. [Joyce Meyer]

But he's trapped, too. Think of it like this: "People who are in prison function, but they aren't *free*. We have to be careful that we don't get so accustomed to being broken that we just learn to live with it and stop dreaming of something better." [Joyce Meyer]

Jesus knew that this man was pretty close to that point, the point of no return. So Jesus asked him "do you want to be healed" because "he wanted to know if this man really had a desire to have a different life. You see the first step in being made well is to have a desire to get well." [Joyce Meyer] If you're broken today, I wonder, do *you* want to be healed—or have you pretty much decided that sick is better?

*{7} The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."*

So whose fault is it that he's not getting well? He blamed it on *others*. "There's no one to help me; someone always beats me in. Poor, poor, pitiful me." We all have excuses for not getting well; some of them are good. Some aren't.

People who wanted healing in the pool of Bethesda had to take a big chance. Remember: the pool was 40' deep with no shallow end.



It was a 20' drop before a person even hit the water. [Dr. Jim Flemming, *The Gospel of John*] A person in need of healing literally had to take the plunge. If healing didn't come, he'd likely drown. And what if you were the second one in? No healing for you. No wonder that man spent so much time at the poolside trying to figure out if the risk was worth it. Healing takes courage – and commitment.

But there are ways that we can reduce the risk and cost of healing. What if the hurting and broken people on the poolside got together and helped each other? How hard would it have been for them to organize a co-op? "I'll help you in, then you come back and help me in?" What if all those people at the poolside – instead of seeing themselves as broken individuals, saw themselves as part of a team.

What if *we* banded together, even in our brokenness -- just imagine what we could do! If we all had someone to help us with our healing and someone to be with us even if it doesn't come we'd be more likely to take the plunge. That's where Stephen Ministers and Deacons and faithful friends come in. They give us the courage we need to seek healing.

What keeps you from doing the things you need to do for a fuller and more fulfilling life? Is it the cost of counseling? How much does *divorce* cost? Is it the cost of schooling? How much is lack of a college degree costing you? Is it the pain of breaking away from an unhealthy relationship? What are you missing out on because of that relationship? One pastor has noted: “Not everyone wants to get well badly enough to do what is required.” [Joyce Meyer] We always have to ask, am I doing everything within *my own power* – not *other people’s power* – to get well?

Despite the man’s ambivalence,

*{8} Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." {9} At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.*

Imagine the joy! New life at 38. He was finally able to walk. Unsteady at first—his muscles were weak, his joints sore and stiff, but slowly he rises, walks, and stands tall. And where does Jesus find him next? In the Temple! For the first time in 38 years he was finally allowed inside (disabled people were not allowed in the Temple). He can worship God alongside others for the first time his life. And this day he knew that he owed his new life to God.

The whole city should be celebrating, except for one small detail....

*{9b} Now that day was a Sabbath.{10} So the Jews [the religious leaders] said to the man who had been cured, "It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." ... {18} For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.*

Not everyone was happy about the man’s healing. Carrying a mat was work and not allowed on the Sabbath. Do you think they were really concerned about this man or even the Sabbath? The Pharisees were threatened by the man’s *healing* because they were threatened by the *healer*. The Pharisees were thinking “What if everyone started breaking the Sabbath, what if everyone interpreted God’s law in their own way, what if everyone started getting healed – then there would be no healthy and sick, strong and

weak, educated and ignorant, us and them!” The Pharisees couldn’t have *that*. They needed people to need *them* for forgiveness, healing and hope. They needed Jesus gone. The Pharisees would rather have broken people lying around a useless pool than going to the Living Water himself for healing.

Don’t be surprised if some people aren’t ready to celebrate or support you in your healing, when you’re finally ready to take the plunge. Healing in one part of our lives affects other parts of our lives—and the people around us. When my mother became more assertive, we were not cheering her along as a family. She was tired of feeling taken for granted, like a cruise director, maid, and unpaid chauffeur. “But you used to do all these things for us...” we protested. But our disappointment didn’t mean that it wasn’t the right thing for her to do. She needed to get well, no matter how it affected the rest of us. She wasn’t going to lie by the pool one more day. Jesus gave her the power to stand up for herself. It took us a while to say that we were glad she took the risk.

This is a story about Jesus’ incredible power to heal—to give new life—but it also teaches us three things about *our* role in the healing process.

First, we need to be in the right place, go to the right source for healing. Another thirty-eight years at that pool wouldn’t have changed a thing for that man: he was in the wrong place. He needed to be with Jesus. Sometimes Jesus comes to us. More often we need to seek him out in prayer and worship.

Second, we need to get over our ambivalence about our own healing. We need to be determined to get well and break free, despite the pain of change. Healing is risky. So is staying sick. God can give us the courage to take the risk.

Third, not everyone is going to be excited about our healing. Unhealthy people are sometimes threatened by healthy ones. But it’s your life, your body, your heart, your mind, your soul, your future—and God wants you whole.

It’s never too late for healing. The man by the pool was near the end of his natural life span when Jesus gave him new life. No matter your age, Jesus can do the same for you. Amen.

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